alphaville
JOURNAL OF FILM AND SCREEN MEDIA

From Self-fulfilment to Survival of the Fittest: Work in European Cinema from the 1960s to the Present. Ewa Mazierska. Berghahn Books, 2015 (303 pages).

Nick Hodgin

In *From Self-fulfilment to Survival of the Fittest: Work in European Cinema from the 1960s to the Present* Ewa Mazierska aims to "gauge how much life is left in the distinguished ghost" of communism in Europe (3). Mazierska makes clear that her book is intended as a contribution to the recent attempts to revive Marxist thought in film and cultural studies—and, indeed, the monograph is one of several publications by the author through which she thoughtfully deploys Marxist thought in her analysis of European cinema. A theoretically sophisticated and highly readable study, at once a history of work on screen and a critique of capitalism (and latterly its neoliberal variant), the book is also intended to address the paucity of scholarly interest in the topic—a paucity that is surprising given that, as she argues, work is nearly always present on screen, whether actually represented or as a context for on-screen behaviour, character types, and relationships.

From Self-fulfilment to Survival of the Fittest thus sets out to investigate the ways in which filmmakers from more than twenty countries have represented the change in realities of work over the last half century, beginning with a useful introductory chapter in which the reader is presented with theories of work. Here, Mazierska examines the history of (modern) work making particular use of David Harvey's, theories and referring to other relevant thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci. Mindful of the ways in which questions of class may, if not carefully considered, complicate or obfuscate any discussion of the broader contexts of working life, Mazierska sets about determining what such broad—or even misunderstood or misused—categories, such as middle class and the precariat actually comprise. The author's overview of relevant social theorists and historians together with her wide knowledge of working practices and working cultures across ideological and national borders provides a useful starting point for her subsequent investigations into the changing realities of work and their representation in the chapters that follow.

The chapters are organised chronologically, with each one devoted to a single decade. More critical readers might question such neat separation, but Mazierska does briefly acknowledge that significant developments may only be understood retrospectively, and demonstrates how each decade is distinct from the others. In "The 1960s: In Search of Fulfilment", the author brings to bear her knowledge of developments in and across different European cinemas analysed, in particular, with reference to modes of production and consumption, discussing both films that will be well known to film scholars (i.e. British kitchen sink dramas) and those that have received far less critical attention—at least in English-

language studies—including *Man is not a Bird* (*Čovek nije tica*, Dušan Makavejev, 1965) and *The Pier* (*Molo*, Wojciech Solarz,1969). The choice of films exemplifies the author's reminder in the previous chapter that work films do not comprise a standalone genre (which may account for film scholars' reluctance to study the subject). Since studying work in cinematic production is not limited by genre considerations, we can investigate its representation and meaning across a wide range of films, and Mazierska engages in some intriguing analyses of films seldom considered in terms of work, such as Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) and Peter Watkins' *Privilege* (1967), which are discussed in the same chapter as examples from Polish and Czech cinema. The author's intention to review what work is means not only enquiring into the relationships between employer and employed, the effects of work on the individual and, by extension, society, and doing this in the context of traditional workplace environments, but also extending her concerns to more extreme working environments. In separate sections in two of the chapters, therefore, she turns to concentration camps (and to the Gulags in another), investigating the contexts and effects of forced labour, arguing that films such as *Passenger* (*Pasażerka*, Andrzej Munk, 1963) "can be seen as a critique of an extreme example of a capitalist system" (94).

While the 1960s can be seen as a decade that was generally good for workers, the 1970s, the subject of the following chapter, served as a decade that, though more fractious, was also one in which "the cause of capitalism" (100) was strengthened following stronger political and economic integration, fluctuating East-West co-operation, and the end of Western Europe's two dictatorships (in Portugal and Spain). Where the first volume of Marx's *Capital* served as a base for thoughts in the preceding chapter, it is the second volume of that work, and its consideration of the circulation of capital, that guides her analysis of films here. Mazierska disagrees with Dudley Andrew's observation that the decade's films were "utterly unremarkable" (qtd. in Mazierska 104) and the chapter's lively discussion of a wide range of films by directors including Alexander Kluge, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jean-Luc Godard, Andrzej Wajda, Konrad Wolf and Lindsey Anderson provides evidence that the cinema landscape of the period was fertile, producing films that represented both important political developments (including feminist politics and the fragmentation among the left) and radical innovation (Brecht's influence on Fassbinder and Godard is revisited). Her survey of developments across and beyond ideological borders allows for some intriguing comparisons: one section provides, for example, a discussion of *Carry on at Your Convenience* (Gerald Thomas, 1971), and the Soviet comedy *Office Romance* (*Sluzhebnyy,* Eldar Ryazanov, 1977), while another attends to the infamous Nazi exploitation film *The Gestapo's Last Orgy* (*L'ultima orgia del III Reich*, Cesare Canevari, 1977), arguing that such productions are significant in what they reveal of the times in which they were made and offering in the case of the latter "a metaphor for the post-Fordist world" (144).

Neoliberalism, a term too often used, as James Ferguson has noted, as a "sloppy synonym for capitalism" (171), is concisely and usefully considered via Marx (with reference to the third volume of *Capital*), Harvey, and Giorgio Agamben at the beginning of the third chapter on the 1980s ("The 1980s: Learning to Survive"). Arguing with others that Britain may be regarded a laboratory of neoliberalism, Mazierska devotes much of this chapter to films made in and about Britain, with useful analysis of some of Mike Leigh's key films, but including also nuanced discussions of Pedro Almodóvar's *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*, 1980), Aki Kaurismäki's *Ariel* (1988), and Jerzy Skolimowski's *Moonlighting* (1982) and *Success is the Best Revenge* (1984) that trace similarities in the ways in which desensitised workers and the new poor came to be represented across Europe, both East and West.

In the final chapter, "The 1990s, the 2000s and Beyond: Moving towards the Unknown", the author addresses films made over the last quarter of a century, arguing that these often "attempt to account for systemic oppression suffered by people thrown into the neoliberal world" (204), a world no longer defined by the geopolitics of the Cold War, but by "bare life". Films such as *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1966) and *Human Resources* (*Ressources humaines*, Lauren Cantent, 1999) can, she suggests, "be seen as merciful works, sparing the viewers the pain of witnessing their characters' defeat or as pre-revolutionary works, showing that progressive social movements can be created" (226). Such optimism is not borne out by the films' reception or their afterlife (if anything, films such as *Brassed Off* have been problematically co-opted by the local heritage industry and not reinvigorated any class consciousness or revival of postindustrial community spirit) nor by the tendency for filmmakers in the 1990s and into the new millennium to revisit the 1970s. The nostalgia that shapes many of these narratives is in itself more problematic and, though the author acknowledges that these films tend to compare "a usually innocent past with a corrupted present", more scrutiny of the reasons for this nostalgic turn would have been welcome (236).

The conclusion offers some sober thoughts on the idea of work. Full-time employment, Mazierska reminds us, is not a Marxist ideal; and she sees the left as clinging to outdated modes of thinking: their determination to secure (or reinstate) workers' rights and other increasingly eroded benefits rather than fighting for "fairer distribution of the surplus product and value" has meant that "the left has been reduced to fighting the right on the right's terms" (260). In order to proceed to a more equitable society in which workers—whether those working in factories or call centres or universities—are better able to negotiate the conditions of their work, the neoliberal project should, she stresses, be abandoned. Though many filmmakers may be committed to highlighting the alienation of labour or the corrosion of communities and have at their disposal an important medium through which they might potentially contribute to such change, most "do not encourage viewers to change the capitalist status quo by illuminating advantages of the action in the right direction" (265). "I certainly crave … future-oriented cinema, in order not to lose hope that change is possible", she says (265). Whether such desires will ever be satisfied remains to be seen. It seems more likely that, no matter how earnest their intentions, filmmakers will continue to provide accounts that might carry the subheading "Carry on Capitalism". One hopes, then, that scholars like Mazierska will continue to keep pace with developments, not only to provide much-needed analysis and critique, but also to remind filmmakers and film scholars alike about film's potential.

References

Andrew, Dudley. "Time Zones and Jetlag: The Flows and Phases of World cinema." *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, edited by Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen E. Newman, Routledge, 2010, pp. 59–89.

Ariel. Directed by Aki Kaurismäki, Finnish Film Foundation, 1988.

Blow-Up. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, Bridge Films, 1966.

Brassed Off. Directed by Mark Herman, Channel Four Films, 1966.

Carry on at Your Convenience. Directed by Gerald Thomas, Rank Organisation, 1971.

Ferguson, James. "The Uses of Neoliberalism." *Antipode*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 166–84.

The Gestapo's Last Orgy [*L'ultima orgia del III Reich*]. Directed by Cesare Canevari, Cine Lu.Ce., 1977.

Human Resources [*Ressources Humaines*]. Directed by Lauren Cantent, La Sept-Art, 1999.

Man is not a Bird [*Čovek nije tica*]. Directed by Dušan Makavejev, Avala Film, 1965.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. 1867–1883. Vintage Books, 1977.

Moonlighting. Directed by Jerzy Skolimowski, Michael White Productions, 1982.

Office Romance [*Sluzhebnyy*]. Directed by Eldar Ryazanov, Mozfilm, 1977.

Passenger [*Pasażerka*]. Directed by Andrzej Munk, 1963.

Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls Like Mom [*Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón*]. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar, Fígaro Films, 1980.

The Pier [*Molo*]. Directed by Wojciech Solarz, Film Polski, 1969.

Privilege. Directed by Peter Watkins, Universal Picture, 1967.

Success is the Best Revenge. Directed by Jerzy Skolimowski, Gaumont, 1984.

Suggested Citation

Hodgin, Nick. "*From Self-fulfilment to Survival of the Fittest: Work in European Cinema from the 1960s to the Present* by Ewa Mazierska." Book Review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 14, Winter 2017, pp. 225–228. www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue14/ReviewHodgin.pdf. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Nick Hodgin is Lecturer in German Studies at Cardiff University. His research interests include East German cultural history and film studies and he has published widely on these areas.